American workers have little to celebrate this Labor Day. Thirty-three months out of the Reagan recession, the civilian unemployment rate stands at 7.3 percent, a record for this stage in an economic recovery. As usual, the black unemployment rate is twice the national average. The percentages represent 8.4 million officially unemployed American workers; counting discouraged workers and the underemployed, as the official statistics do not, the number of people working less than they want to comes to just under 20 million. These record rates of unemployment are accompanied by record lengths of duration. Over the past two years, the average period of unemployment has been 19.1 weeks, significantly higher than any other two-year average in the postwar period. Unemployment insurance coverage is also near record lows; less than one-third of the unemployed are now receiving benefits, as compared with roughly one-half in the 1970s. Despite this, Congress voted in April to discontinue the Federal supplemental unemployment benefits program initiated during the 1981-82 recession.

Those who are working are not doing so well either. Despite the record-shattering political business cycle engineered by the Reagan Administration, real average gross weekly earnings in 1984 stagnated at levels 12.5 percent below their 1972 peak. Close to 34 million Americans are still living below the poverty line; some 100 million live below the Bureau of Labor Statistics' "low standard city budget for a family of four." With growth slow and jobs vanishing under the pressures of a $150 billion trade deficit, there is little likelihood that the situation will improve substantially any time soon.

Unions are not doing much better. Average first-year wage increases in major private collective bargaining agreements set a record low at 2.4 percent last year, lagging, for the third year in a row, significantly behind inflation. This dismal bargaining performance in part reflects the spectacular decline in union membership over the Reagan years, a decline recently confirmed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which reports a 22.4 percent drop in unionization rates for the private sector from 1980 to 1984. Unions now claim only 15.6 percent of the private sector work force and an even smaller proportion in growth sectors like finance, insurance and real estate (2.7 percent), services (7.2 percent) and wholesale and retail trade (8.2 percent). This membership level cannot even be preserved, let alone strengthened, at the current rate of organizing. In 1984, for the third year in a row, unions organized fewer than 100,000 workers through representational elections before the National Labor Relations Board. Whatever organizing gains unions do achieve, their consolidation requires a credible threat of economic force, but the unions, visibly shaken by their losses over the past few years, are reluctant to risk a strike. As of July, the Bureau of Labor Statistics had reported only eighteen major strikes in the United States (defined as involving at least 1,000 workers and lasting at
least one shift), the lowest level of strike activity on record. On average, during the 1960s and 1970s there were 285 major strikes per year.

Nor has the Reagan Administration diminished its assault on worker rights. At the N.L.R.B., the antiunion decisions continue. Since Reagan appointee Donald Dotson became chair, unions have lost an average of 57 percent of contested cases decided by the board (compared with 16 percent from 1974 to 1976, under the last Republican-dominated board) and have lost fully 86 percent of the cases brought against them. At the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, as a massive recent study of the agency by the Office of Technology Assessment (O.T.A.) confirms, enforcement levels have slid to a point where they provide virtually no deterrent to violations of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The O.T.A. estimates, for example, that manufacturers who violate the act can expect, on average, a penalty of only $6.50. (The Administration does occasionally take time out from its attacks on workers to reward its few friends in the labor movement. After waiting a discreet interval after the election, it dropped plans to prosecute International Brotherhood of Teamsters president Jackie Presser, a Reagan loyalist, whose $755,000 annual package of salaries and expenses makes him the best-paid F.B.I. informant in history.)

In all this misery, however, there are a few bright spots. Despite the generally dismal record on organizing, several particularly aggressive and interesting campaigns—including the Federation of University Employees Local 34 drive at Yale University, the Service Employees International Union (S.E.I.U.) Local 100 efforts in Louisiana, and the coordinated campaign of the United Food & Commercial Workers and S.E.I.U. against the giant Beverly nursing home chain—have scored successes. In these drives and others, the unions showed an increasing willingness to coordinate their efforts, to raise "nontraditional" workplace demands and to broaden the scope of organizing efforts beyond the particular work sites in dispute.

Opposition movements continue to build in some of the more corrupt unions. To take one of the most corrupt—the Teamsters—as an example, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (T.D.U.) leader Linda Gregg recently won an important election in Denver Local 435, the largest Teamsters local in the Rocky Mountain region, after Presser had overturned the results of a previous victory; and in July the T.D.U. successfully mobilized Teamster car haulers to reject the terms of Presser’s latest sweetheart contract.

Even the A.F.L.-C.I.O. leadership—after squandering three years and untold millions of dollars in an ill-fated effort to elect Walter Mondale as President—showed some signs of life this spring. In The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions, the federation’s Committee on the Evolution of Work called on the labor movement to increase its internal coordination, develop more aggressive and varied organizing strategies, encourage fuller participation by workers in union affairs, widen the range of issues around which it seeks to mobilize and, significantly, attempt to extend union membership and services to workers outside traditional bargaining units. These, of course, are precisely the sorts of suggestions many on the left have been making to the labor movement for years. It is regrettable that labor’s recent catastrophes were required for those suggestions to be heard. It is unfortunate, too, that suggestions regarding internal union democracy, among other things, have still to be heard. And it is true, particularly where the A.F.L.-C.I.O. is concerned, that there is only the most imperfect relationship between words and actions. Still, the report is welcome.

Even more welcome are various efforts under way to contest the stranglehold the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s Washington bureaucracy has long held on organized labor’s foreign policy positions. For more than a generation the leadership of the federation has tirelessly promoted the worst aspects of U.S. foreign policy. In the name of free trade unionism it has used the labor movement as a conduit for all manner of moneys and other forms of aid to bolster repressive regimes abroad. In the name of patriotism it has urged on the slaughter of countless union members and their sons in U.S. military adventures. And in the name of democracy it has thrown in its lot with some of the most reactionary and anti-labor forces in American domestic politics—as A.F.L.-C.I.O. president Lane Kirkland is doing at the National Endowment for Democracy, where he joins the rabidly anti-labor Senator Orrin Hatch in dispensing funds to overthrow the government of Nicaragua—and divided labor from its natural allies among antiwar and anti-intervention movements.

For the first time in recent memory, however, such actions no longer go uncontested in the labor movement. A variety of union groups have formed to protest apartheid, implement a nuclear freeze and commit the United States to a more peaceful course in Central America. These are not marginal political projects that the A.F.L.-C.I.O. bureaucracy can afford to ignore; they involve substantial numbers of established trade unionists. The National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, for example, probably the most important of the new groups, whose views stand in sharp opposition to U.S. and traditional A.F.L.-C.I.O. policies in Central America, includes the leaders of half the total membership of U.S. labor unions. Commenting on the committee’s work, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union vice president Edward Clark observed, “The days are over when a small group of right-wing staffers in Washington develops foreign policy for the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and gets a rubber stamp from the executive council.”

Now that’s some good news for American labor.

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